

RIGHT-WING UKRAINIAN LEADER IS (SURPRISE) JEWISH, AND (REAL SURPRISE) PROUD OF IT

From the Text: " My meeting with Right Sector's Borislav Bereza, newly elected member of the Ukrainian Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, took place on a sunny Friday morning. We met at a table with a magnificent view of the Dnieper River on the third-floor food court of the Sky Mall in Kiev. Despite the prognostications of Russian television, the right wing and ultra-nationalist party that is widely considered to be emblematic of the new iteration of "Ukrainian Fascism" failed to breach the 5 percent threshold required for parliamentary representation. Only two of its deputies were elected from the party to represent specific constituencies, party leader Dmitry Yarosh and party speaker Bereza, who ran a slightly frenzied campaign that focused on his busting up illegal unlicensed bars and underground casinos. That Bereza is a proudly outspoken and synagogue-going Jew is often pointed out by those who do not agree with the mounting equivalence of Right Sector with neo-fascism.

We were put in touch by a mutual friend whom we both highly respect, a Kiev-based Orthodox Jewish film producer. Bereza is very tall and has a muscular build. He has the broad shoulders and wide gait of a boxer along with a receding hairline and piercing gray eyes. He wears a diamond earring in his left ear and sports smart blue blazers over polka dot blue shirts with the Ukrainian emblem pinned to his lapel. Loquacious, and bluntly plain spoken, he speaks in a quick flow of short and declarative sentences and often cannot wait for you to finish your sentence before launching into the breathless reply. The day before we met he had told a Ukrainian newspaper that "Putin understands very well that his modern Russia could very well follow in the footsteps of the USSR with a complete collapse."

Undiplomatic and completely intense, Bereza, who spoke with me in Russian, turned out to be one of the most likable politicians I had ever met, a cross between a drinking buddy, an Israeli paratrooper, and the aggressively militant Jewish partisan played by Liev Schreiber in *Defiance*. I congratulated him with a "Mazel tov" on his being elected a deputy and he responded with an enthusiastic "Baruch Hashem!"

You are a Jew.

Yes. I am a Jew.

So, you are Jewish believer, I am told you go to synagogue, and also that you strongly consider yourself to be a member of the Jewish people.

Of course. I am not an Orthodox Jew, I do not wear peyes, or a kippah in public, but I try to go to synagogue as often as I can. I study the Torah, and that is absolutely a harmonically integrated part of my life. I go to Israel every year, since 1993, and I have lived there.

But you are also a member of Right Sector?

I am a Jew and also a Cohen. There have never been any questions about this. Right Sector is composed of people of varied nationalities, not just Ukrainians and Jews, but also Poles and Belorussians, Georgians, Chechens, we have people of every [Soviet] ethnicity represented. The question is not one of ethnicity; it is “are you a Ukrainian? Do you support Ukraine? Are you a Ukrainian patriot?” In which case, you are my brother. If you are Ukraine’s enemy, whatever nationality you might be, you and I have nothing to talk about.

The reason such questions arise is that, as you know, this country has historically witnessed many problems between its constituent nationalities. There have always been problems between Poles and Ukrainians, Ukrainians and Russians and, yes, Ukrainians and Jews.

Yes, that is so. I do not deny that. I have myself experienced casual everyday anti-Semitism. This is something I have experienced continuously since living in the Soviet Union, when my father could not go to the university he wanted to attend because he was a Jew. There were quotas for Jews, he was told. Yes, of course you are right.

I know that anti-Semitism still exists on the everyday level in Ukraine, I have felt it myself. But it is a minor problem. There is also Russophobia and Ukrainophobia here in certain quarters, it certainly exists. But the question of anti-Semitism is not a serious ideological problem or question in this society.

All right, I understand and respect your position. However that answer is not entirely satisfying. Many of the emblems and symbols of your movement strike many people as problematic. These are World War II symbols that—

Which symbols?

—Well, let’s start with the Red and Black [flag](#) of the UPA [or Ukrainian Insurgent Army], under which you march. Under which you fight.

Great! Wonderful! You have to understand: It was not merely the representatives of the Red Army that were annihilated under the auspices of the Red and Black flag, but also fascists, as well as all those who were invading Ukrainian lands. The Red and Black flag of the UPA represented the fight for an independent Ukraine. Do you know the three classic principles that [Stepan] Bandera postulated in relation to all the national minorities living in Ukraine?

No, I don’t.

He said: “If you help me, reach out your hand to help me create a free Ukraine, you are my brother.” He also added, “However, if you don’t help me, do not reach out your hand to help me, but neither do you hinder me, you can live here. There is enough room here and you can live here.” That was his classic phrase, “There is room here.” But, the conclusion: “If you hinder the process, stick

spokes in the wheel, then you are an enemy and you need to be destroyed." So, it is all very simple.

For my ideological brothers in the movement I am much more Ukrainian than an ethnic Ukrainian like [Ukrainian Communist Party leader Petro] Symonenko. When we speak, for example about Bandera, I was too once one of those who thought, having imbibed Soviet propaganda, that he was a fascist. But I was able to read many books and to think and figure out the truth: that this was a man who spent much of the war inside of a German internment camp. That he was *liquidated* by Soviet, rather than Nazi, intelligence agents.

Right Sector is also often accused of being quite reactionary on the question of LGBT rights, gay rights. What is your relationship personally and also as a party toward gays?

Again, the infringement of LGBT rights is, much like anti-Semitism, a real and substantive problem, but I do not know of a single country where homophobia does not exist. I do not know of a country where there are no homophobes or xenophobes. Such people exist everywhere. Personally I have no issues with LGBT and think this to be a matter of personal freedom.

I support the comment of [Faina Ranevskaya](#), who once said that a tragedy will come upon any government that is concerned with what the citizenry chooses to do with their asses. Which is a very crude way to put it of course.

Yet, even more than that: I personally want to go on the record as saying that I love the work of Freddie Mercury and I like to wear nice things designed by Armani.

It's true that you are well dressed.

Thank you. I agree with you. I want to say that for me the problem of homophobia does not exist. I want to say again that I think sexual orientation, personal choice of religion and ethnicity are all matters of personal freedom and personal conscience.

Yes, but can you vouch that everyone else in Right Sector feels that way?

We do not have a totalitarian sect. No, in our party we do have people who are homophobes. But I cannot order them to stop being homophobes. I can debate with them, try to argue with them and attempt to change their mind. But I cannot force them to change their mind. All I can do is to publicly state my position.

Because, as you well know, on Oct. 31 there was an arson [attack](#) on the Molodist Film Festival, which took place during the LGBT section of the festival.

Yes, I have categorically condemned that attack. I have also clearly stated that this is an unconscionable act, especially in a country with problems with

corruption, oligarchs, war, economics, picking up this issue at this moment is utterly unconscionable.

Yes. But, as you also probably know your press secretary Artem Skoropadsky publicly confirmed that the perpetrators were Right Sector activists.

That was his own personal phrasing, which was unsanctioned by the party.

His words were unsanctioned?

No. Not sanctioned.

So, the young men who did it, these idiots, these criminals, these barbarians, who did it were not members of Right Sector?

Look, yes there were *also* members of Right Sector involved.

I want to repeat, Right Sector is a cross-section of Ukrainian society, there are all sorts of people in it from every layer of society. We have all sorts of people in Right Sector, they could be anyone. We reflect society, do not idealize us, we are not knights in shining armor. We are what we are. We do have problematic elements and we are continually cleaning ourselves up and getting rid of them. We have internal cleaning/purges and get rid of our problems internally; if we cannot rid ourselves of these issues in house we cast them out of our party publicly.

On this same theme, you may know of another gentleman in parliament named Andriy Biletsky, commander of the Azov Battalion, a rival right-wing group. What do you think about him and his ally the pro-Russian chief of police Vadim Troyan?

Mr. Biletsky is from another ideological wing, which we are not at all involved with.

But those people *are* anti-Semites.

I know that, and that is why we are not in one party with them and not involved with those people. During the Euromaidan all the various parties united around the ideals of saving the Ukrainian government, cutting out Yanukovich. After that there were all sorts of schisms based on ideological questions. But if you want to talk about him, go speak with them. But if you are going to ask me is Biletsky an anti-Semite, I would answer that he probably is, but I will also tell you that in the moment when he needed support to save Ukraine, we supported him to save Ukraine. At this moment our paths have parted and we have each gone in our separate directions.

All right. You come off as an honest guy and I believe you. I believe what you are saying about not having relations with anti-Semitic groups on the nationalist right.

Thank you.

So, tell me what would you say to those Russians, those Americans, those Frenchman—

Those Israelis—

—Yes, those Israelis also, as well as all those people everywhere who believe that Right Sector is a cancer, that these people are nationalists. That you are a bad movement.

I can say over and over that we are not xenophobes, anti-Semites, fascists, but for people who are under the influence of Russian propaganda there is nothing I can do until they choose to look themselves. A few days ago, someone I knew came here from Russia and asked me beforehand if there were not arresting Russians in the street, if there were not bandits killing you for speaking Russian in Kiev.

Yes, people do believe that.

I told him to not believe it and to resist propaganda when he returned! But it is hard to resist the propaganda. If they tell you every day that your daughter is a prostitute, eventually you will believe it even if you only have a son. Here we have the same situation. The Russians are winning the information war. We are strong with works and acts. We are strong in spirit! Do not forget that Ukraine produced numerous tzadiks. Rabbi Nachman of Uman, the Breslov Rebbe. Ukraine has given the world the gift of many tzadiks! And every year we have masses of religious pilgrims, without incident. If we had incidents would so many pilgrims travel to Uman?

There have been [incidents](#).

There are incidents everywhere! They arrested a gang of neo-Nazis in Israel last year.

Look at this country where the governor of Dnipropetrovsk [Kollomoisky] is a Jew, where numerous heads of administration are Jews, where the speaker of Right Sector is a Jew! How can one speak of anti-Semitism? How can one speak of fascism?

To be a Jew is to yearn for freedom; that is why we left Egypt. To be a Jew is to reject being a slave. This is the essence of Judaism. That is also why we stand strong against Russian imperialism, which is a form of enslavement. With some exceptions like [Boris] Nemtsov or the dearly departed [Valeriya] [Novodvorskaya](#) who see through the propaganda, the Russians are currently slaves." End of Text

<https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/187217/borislav-bereza>

Like this article? Sign up for our [Daily Digest](#) to get Tablet Magazine's new content in your inbox each morning.

Vladislav Davidzon, the Chief Editor of The Odessa Review, is a Russian-American writer, translator, and critic. He was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and lives in Paris.